

Short Paper #1: Ethics of "Taste, Ties, and Time"

HyungJin Cho

Introduction

"Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com" (2008) is a paper presenting descriptive findings from social network datasets. Assessing this ethically controversial project, I intend to take an opposite viewpoint to the majority who points out the ethical issues. By playing devil's advocate, I expect a better-balanced review on this project. The assessment followed the framework of Salganik's four principles of ethical research; the principle of respect for law and public interest, beneficence, justice, and respect for persons.

Principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest

Law is said to be the minimum of ethics. Indeed, the principle of respect for the law has a clear standard, while other principles provide an abstract and vague guideline in practice. This is one advantage of rule-based approach over a principle-based approach that it has clarity in application. In terms of the judicial judgment, it is hard to rebut this project is not violating any federal or state law. The researchers used legally compliant data collected under Facebook's terms of service and conducted research without any serious breach of law. It is not a researcher's duty, but a legislator's obligation to amend a law if it doesn't reflect current demand on research ethics. At this moment, however, there is no obvious evidence to assert this project is illegal.

Next, beyond individual interest, the public interest is a vital factor to be considered in conducting a research. To secure public interest, the transparency of the study is essential. In other words, the principle of respect for public interest requires a research with transparency-based accountability. Since this project is published in a journal article, public are available to access the detailed information about the research, which satisfies the transparency requirement. The published paper also contributes to the society as it shares the knowledge to every member of the society. Indubitably, the project lacks the public communication in the process of research, but it was inevitable to avoid unexpected influence on the study, such as a subject-expectancy effect.

Principle of Beneficence

Risks and benefits of the study should be examined so that it can limit the harm and increase the benefit. In this particular study, it contains relatively little harm since the study is descriptive rather than manipulating certain variables. It is unquestioning that this research involves little physical risks, but there could be information risks, for instance, de-anonymization. Because every single information is potentially sensitive and identifiable, it is required to be cautious in protecting data.

Principle of Justice

The benefit of the study should be distributed fairly. The data were collected from Facebook profiles of all members of the Class of 2009 at a various private college in the Northeastern U.S. Since the knowledge derived from the study benefits the participants as well, it can be argued that the study meets the principle of justice.

Though it is partly true, there're some points that need to be considered. First, there was no direct compensation to the subjects. Researchers need to give back the benefits to the subjects if they benefited from their participation. Additionally, there are isolated groups of people who are not represented by this private college student sample, so that can't enjoy the knowledge gained from this research. On the other hand, it is also disputable that while the students of the Class of 2009 paid the costs, other students who didn't participate also get the benefits.

Principle of Respect for Persons

The principle of respect for persons stresses the autonomy of participants. In this project, it is undeniable that the participants did not have sufficient control over the study. The participants did not submit consents and even were not aware of the study. Nonetheless, there are rationales for lack of consents.

As the book, *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*, explicates, informed consents are not available when the experiment design involves deception or brings out logistical impracticality. Since this project tried to avoid any undesired influence based on the subject's expectation, it is permissive that informed consents were omitted. One thing that has no excuse is

that the authors didn't provide the debriefing about the study after the research, which I view it as a critical moral deficit.

Conclusion

By taking the perspective of a defender of the paper, "Tastes, ties, and time", it became evident there're legitimate reasons for arguing the study has no significant ethical issues. Nevertheless, as far as I'm concerned, I would not use the data for my own research. As Immanuel Kant's theory of morality conveys, the end does not justify the means and people must be treated as the end.

In fact, from the view of consequentialism, the study may have more benefits than risks. That means the principle of beneficence may be fulfilled with this project without a major issue. However, this perspective does not guarantee to satisfy the principle of respect for persons and it is required to make a balanced moral evaluation through four principles.

The project has a couple of specific moral issues in the experiment. For example, the study didn't provide informed consent, nor did it debrief. This fails to conform to the principle assuring subject's autonomy. Also, the study argued that they used public data, however, it may be legal but can be possibly categorized as private data depending on the contextual integrity. In my opinion, this study has more room to be an ethically acceptable research. Thus, I would not use the data before I confirm that these issues are fixed.

Reference

- Lewis, K., Kaufman, J., Gonzalez, M., Wimmer, A., & Christakis, N. (2008). Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com. *Social networks*, 30(4), 330-342.
- Salganik, Matthew J. (2017). *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press.
- Zimmer, M. (2010). "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and information technology*, 12(4), 313-325.